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What Is Hezbollah?

Military experience gained from fighting in Syria's civil war and decades of clashes with Israel have made the Iran-backed group stronger than ever, but the biggest threat it faces may be upheaval in its own backyard.

WRITTEN BY

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Summary

Hezbollah wields significant power in Lebanon, where it operates as both a Shiite political party and militant group.

It opposes Israel and Western powers operating in the Middle East, and it functions as a proxy of Iran, its largest benefactor.

The group has faced unprecedented scrutiny from the Lebanese public amid the country's political and economic crisis.

Introduction

Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group based in Lebanon, where its extensive security apparatus, political organization, and social services network fostered its reputation as “a state within a state.” Founded in the chaos of the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War, the Iran-backed group is driven by its opposition to Israel and its resistance to Western influence in the Middle East.

With its history of carrying out global terrorist attacks, parts of Hezbollah—and in some cases the entire organization—have been designated as a terrorist group by the United States and many other countries. In recent years, long-standing alliances with Iran and Syria have embroiled the group in the civil war in Syria, where its support for Bashar al-Assad’s regime has transformed Hezbollah into an increasingly effective military force. But with Lebanese politics in upheaval over mass discontent with the ruling class, and with U.S.-Iran tensions rising, Hezbollah’s role in Lebanese society may change.

How did Hezbollah originate?

Hezbollah emerged during Lebanon’s fifteen-year civil war, which broke out in 1975 when long-simmering discontent over the large, armed Palestinian presence in the country reached a boiling point. Various Lebanese sectarian communities held different positions on the nature of the Palestinian challenge.

Under a 1943 political agreement, political power is divided among Lebanon’s predominant religious groups—a Sunni Muslim serves as prime minister, a Maronite Christian as president, and a Shiite Muslim as the speaker of parliament. Tensions between these groups evolved into civil war as several factors upset the delicate balance. The Sunni Muslim population had grown with the arrival of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, while Shiite Muslims felt increasingly marginalized by the ruling Christian minority. Amid the infighting, Israeli forces invaded southern Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982 to expel Palestinian guerrilla fighters that had been using the region as their base to attack Israel.

A group of Shiites influenced by the theocratic government in Iran—the region’s major Shiite government, which came to power in 1979—took up arms against the Israeli occupation. Seeing an opportunity to expand its influence in Arab states, Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) provided funds and training to the budding militia, which adopted the name Hezbollah, meaning “The Party of God.” It earned a reputation for extremist militancy due to its frequent clashes with rival Shiite militias, such as the Amal Movement, and attacks on foreign targets, including the 1983 suicide bombing of barracks housing U.S. and French troops in Beirut, in which more than three hundred people died. Hezbollah became a vital asset to Iran, bridging Shiite Arab-Persian divides as Tehran established proxies throughout the Middle East.

Hezbollah bills itself as a Shiite resistance movement, and it enshrined its ideology in a 1985 manifesto that vowed to expel Western powers from Lebanon, called for the destruction of the Israeli state, and pledged allegiance to Iran’s supreme leader. It also advocated an Iran-inspired Islamist regime, but emphasized that the Lebanese people must have the freedom of self-determination.

Milestones in Hezbollah's History

1943: After twenty-three years as a French mandate, Lebanon gains independence. Its new leaders sign the National Pact, which creates a government system dividing power among the major religious groups.

1970

1971: The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) relocates its headquarters from Jordan to Lebanon.

1980

1975–1990: Lebanon's civil war rages as the country's religious, political, and ethnic sects vie for control, leading to invasions by Israel and Syria and the involvement of the United States and other Western forces, as well as the United Nations.

1983: In April, Beirut's U.S. embassy is bombed, killing 63 people. In October, suicide attacks on barracks housing U.S. and French troops kill 305 people. A U.S. court decides Hezbollah is behind the attacks.

1984: A car bombing attributed to Hezbollah kills dozens of people at the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut.

1985: Hezbollah releases its first manifesto.

1990

1992: In March, the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires is bombed in an attack attributed to Hezbollah. Later this year, Hassan Nasrallah becomes Hezbollah's secretary-general after Israeli forces assassinate his predecessor. Hezbollah wins eight seats in Parliament after participating in national elections for the first time.

1989: Lebanon's parliamentarians meet in Taif, Saudi Arabia, and sign an agreement to end the civil war and grant Syria guardianship over Lebanon. The agreement also orders all militias except for Hezbollah to disarm.

1997: The United States designates Hezbollah a foreign terrorist organization.

1994: Car bombings at Israel's London embassy and a Buenos Aires Jewish community center are attributed to Hezbollah.

2000

2006: Hezbollah abducts two Israeli soldiers, sparking a monthlong war with Israel that leaves more than one thousand Lebanese and fifty Israelis dead.

2005: Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri is assassinated. His death, attributed to Syria, kick-starts the Cedar Revolution. A UN tribunal later implicates Hezbollah in Hariri's death.

2010

2011: Syria descends into civil war. Hezbollah eventually sends thousands of fighters to support Bashar al-Assad's regime.

2009: Hezbollah releases an updated manifesto that expresses more openness to the democratic process.

2013: The EU designates Hezbollah's armed wing a terrorist organization after considerable debate among the bloc's

2012: A suicide bombing targeting a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Bulgaria kills six people. The European Union blames Hezbollah.

members.

2019: Economic woes trigger mass protests calling for the political elite, including Hezbollah, to give up power. Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigns.

2020

2018: Israel discovers miles of tunnels into Israel from southern Lebanon that it says belong to Hezbollah.

2020: A U.S. drone strike in Baghdad kills Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Hezbollah vows retaliation against U.S. forces.

Source: CFR research.

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How is it organized?

Hezbollah is led by Hassan Nasrallah, who took over as secretary-general in 1992 after Israel assassinated the group's cofounder and previous leader, Abbas Al-Musawi. Nasrallah oversees the seven-member Shura Council and its five subcouncils: the political assembly, the jihad assembly, the parliamentary assembly, the executive assembly, and the judicial assembly. The U.S. State Department estimates [PDF] that Hezbollah has tens of thousands of members and other supporters worldwide.

Hezbollah controls much of Lebanon's Shiite-majority areas, including parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the eastern Bekaa Valley region. Although Hezbollah is based in Lebanon, its manifesto clarifies that its operations, especially those targeting the United States, are not confined by domestic borders: "The American threat is not local or restricted to a particular region, and as such, confrontation of such a threat must be international as well." The group has been accused of planning and perpetrating acts of terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, and there is evidence of Hezbollah operations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia.

Iran continues to support Hezbollah with weaponry and more than \$700 million per year, according to 2019 State Department estimates [PDF]. Hezbollah also receives hundreds of millions of dollars [PDF] from legal businesses, international criminal enterprises, and the Lebanese diaspora.

What role has it played in Lebanese politics?

Hezbollah has developed strong political and social arms in addition to its military operations. It has been a fixture of the Lebanese government since 1992, when eight of its members were elected to Parliament, and the party has held cabinet positions since 2005. The most recent national elections, in 2018, granted Hezbollah thirteen seats in Lebanon's 128-member Parliament, three more than the Amal Movement, once its rival but now a coalition partner. The party marked its integration into mainstream politics in 2009 with an updated manifesto that was less Islamist than its predecessor and called for "true democracy."

Additionally, Hezbollah manages a vast network of social services that includes infrastructure, health-care facilities, schools, and youth programs, all of which have been instrumental in garnering support for Hezbollah from Shiite and non-Shiite Lebanese alike. A 2014 report from the Pew Research Center found that 31 percent of Christians and 9 percent of Sunni Muslims held positive views of the group.

At the same time, Hezbollah maintains its military arm. Under the 1989 Taif Agreement, which was brokered by Saudi Arabia and Syria and ended Lebanon's civil war, Hezbollah was the only militia allowed to keep its arms. The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated in 2017 that the militia had up to ten thousand active fighters and some twenty thousand reserves, with an arsenal of small arms, tanks, drones, and various long-range rockets. Analyst and Brigadier General (Ret.) Assaf Orion, of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, says Hezbollah possesses "a larger arsenal of artillery than most nations enjoy," and a 2018 report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies called it "the world's most heavily armed non-state actor."

Critics say Hezbollah's existence violates UN Security Council Resolution 1559—adopted in 2004—which called for all Lebanese militias to disband and disarm. The United Nations Force in Lebanon (UNFIL), first deployed in 1978 to restore the central government's authority, remains in the country and part of its mandate is to encourage Hezbollah to disarm.

In October 2019, Hezbollah saw itself become a target of mass protests. Government mismanagement and years of slow growth have saddled Lebanon with one of the world's highest public debt burdens, at 150 percent of its gross domestic product, and hundreds of thousands of Lebanese citizens disillusioned by the economic slump demanded the removal of what they see as a corrupt ruling elite. Demonstrators called for the government, including Hezbollah, to cede power to a new, technocratic leadership. The monthslong protest movement has spanned religious backgrounds, and even Lebanese Shiites have openly criticized Hezbollah. The group faced further censure in August 2020, when a UN-backed tribunal found Salim Jamil Ayyash, a Hezbollah affiliate, guilty of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Ayyash and the other three living defendants, who were acquitted, were tried in absentia. The whereabouts of the four are not publicly known, and Hezbollah has refused to surrender them to the tribunal.

Where does it stand on Israel?

Israel is Hezbollah's main enemy, dating back to Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon in 1978. Hezbollah has been blamed for attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets abroad, including the 1994 car bombings of a Jewish community center in Argentina, which killed eighty-five people, and the bombings of the Israeli Embassy in London. Even after Israel officially withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, it continued to clash with

Hezbollah, especially in the disputed Shebaa Farms border zone. Periodic conflict between Hezbollah and Israeli forces escalated into a monthlong war in 2006, during which Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets into Israeli territory.

Hezbollah and Israel have yet to relapse into full-blown war, but the group reiterated its commitment to the destruction of the Israeli state in its 2009 manifesto. In December 2018, Israel announced the discovery of miles of tunnels running from Lebanon into northern Israel that it claims were created by Hezbollah. Hezbollah has attacked Israel with sophisticated anti-ship and anti-armor weapons, which Western officials suspect are supplied by Iran. Orion told CFR that the more precise weaponry being provided by Iran ensures that Hezbollah will become an increasingly dangerous threat to Israel.

How is Hezbollah involved in the Syrian Civil War?

Hezbollah finds a loyal ally in Syria, whose army occupied most of Lebanon during Lebanon's civil war. The Syrian government remained as a peacekeeping force in Lebanon until it was driven out in the 2005 Cedar Revolution, a popular protest movement against the foreign occupation. Hezbollah had unsuccessfully pushed for Syrian forces to remain in Lebanon, and has since remained a stalwart ally of the Assad regime. In return for Tehran's and Hezbollah's support, experts say, the Syrian government facilitates the transfer of weapons from Iran to the militia.

Hezbollah publicly confirmed its involvement in the Syrian Civil War in 2013, joining Iran and Russia in supporting the Syrian government against largely Sunni rebel groups. Prior to 2013, the group had sent a small number of trainers to advise the regime. More than seven thousand Hezbollah militants are estimated to have fought in the pro-Assad alliance, which has been instrumental in the survival of the Assad regime, including by winning the 2013 Battle of al-Qusayr, which secured a route for regime forces between the major cities of Damascus and Homs. In 2019, Hezbollah withdrew many of its fighters from Syria, attributing the decision to the Assad regime's military success.

Analysts say that Hezbollah's experience fighting in Syria has helped it become a stronger military force, but that it faces a growing sentiment in Lebanon that focusing on the war led the group to neglect its domestic interests. Additionally, Hezbollah's support from Sunni Muslims in Lebanon has waned over the group's backing of the Assad regime, which particularly threatens Sunni Muslims. In recent years, Sunni extremists have committed terrorist attacks in Lebanon, including 2015 suicide bombings in Beirut claimed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Hezbollah's involvement in the war has also provoked Israel, which has struck targets in Syria thought to be supplying Hezbollah with weapons.

How have the United States and other countries treated the group?

U.S. policymakers see Hezbollah as a global terrorist threat. The United States designated Hezbollah a foreign terrorist organization in 1997, and several individual Hezbollah members, including Nasrallah, are considered specially designated global terrorists, which subjects them to U.S. sanctions. The Barack Obama administration

provided aid to Lebanon's military with the hope of diminishing Hezbollah's credibility as the country's most capable military force. However, Hezbollah's and the Lebanese military's parallel efforts to defend the Syrian border from the Islamic State and al-Qaeda-affiliated militants have made Congress hesitant to send further aid [PDF], for fear that Hezbollah could acquire it.

In 2015, the U.S. Congress passed the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act, which sanctions foreign institutions that use U.S. bank accounts to finance Hezbollah. Lawmakers amended it in 2018 to include additional types of activities. Additionally, the Donald J. Trump administration has sanctioned some of Hezbollah's members in Parliament, as part of its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. While Trump's approach has disrupted Iran's economy, analysts say the country's increasingly self-sufficient proxies are weathering the worst of the sanctions.

The European Union has taken a less aggressive approach to Hezbollah. The bloc designated its military arm a terrorist group in 2013, over its involvement in a bombing in Bulgaria and its backing of the Assad regime, though some EU states feared the move would bruise relations with Lebanon and hurt stability in the region. In 2014, the EU's police agency, Europol, and the United States created a joint group to counter Hezbollah's terrorist activities in Europe. In recent years, several European countries have taken a stronger stance. The UK parliament deemed all of Hezbollah a terrorist group in 2019, followed by the German government in 2020.

Hezbollah has scorned the largely Sunni Gulf Arab countries over their alliances with the United States and European powers. The Gulf Cooperation Council—comprising the seven Arab states of the Persian Gulf, with the exception of Iraq—considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and the United States co-lead the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, created in 2017 to disrupt resource flows to Iran-backed groups such as Hezbollah.

What is the future of the organization?

Experts say that Hezbollah's international network is expanding, but that the group isn't eager for outright war with Israel or the United States, pointing to its muted response to an Israeli drone strike in Beirut in August 2019. Instead, some analysts say, Hezbollah would rather rely on covert operations and terrorist activities, especially if Israel or the United States was to declare war with Iran. Tensions are mounting, however: In September 2019, Hezbollah attacked an Israeli army base—the first serious cross-border exchange in more than four years. The attack led the Israel Defense Forces to conduct a weeklong simulation in May 2020 of a war against Hezbollah.

U.S.-Iran relations worsened further after a January 2020 U.S. air strike that killed Qasem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC's elite Quds Force, which is responsible for the corps' external operations. In response, Nasrallah promised that Hezbollah would attack U.S. forces but not target American civilians.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah could see a more pressing threat in its own backyard. The January 2020 formation of a Hezbollah-backed government under Prime Minister Hassan Diab failed to appease antiestablishment protesters, who saw it as a win for the country's entrenched elites. Unemployment, poverty, and debt have continued to soar under the new government, and demonstrations have persisted for months despite a

lockdown to combat the pandemic of a new coronavirus disease, COVID-19. But experts suspect that Hezbollah will not bend to protesters' demands for a new, politically independent government, fearing that such an outcome would weaken the group's power and force it to disarm. Still, some argue that the protest movement could undermine Hezbollah's influence more effectively than any U.S. policy ever has, by opening the floodgates of criticism of the group and potentially reinventing the system of government it has become expert in exploiting. For now, Hezbollah continues to assert its influence across all branches of government. For example, a June 2020 order from a Lebanese judge barred the country's media from interviewing the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon after she criticized Hezbollah in a television interview.

Recommended Resources

CFR's Global Conflict Tracker follows Lebanon's history of political strife.

This CFR Backgrounder looks at Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Brian Katz argues that Hezbollah poses a bigger threat to Israel than ever before in this *Foreign Affairs* analysis.

Monahad Hage Ali examines Hezbollah's relationship with Syria in this 2019 analysis for the Carnegie Middle East Center.

The Wilson Center discusses Hezbollah's evolution from an underground militia to a political powerhouse.

Journalist Michal Kranz argues in *Foreign Policy* that Hezbollah's base of support is spreading beyond its Shiite roots.

Nathalie Bussemaker contributed to this report.

For media inquiries on this topic, please reach out to communications@cfr.org.